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Arms talks going well — despite public posturing

Geneva teams push ahead with bargaining on substance

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Round 1 of the two superpowers' public exchanges on nuclear arms control is a standoff. Both Moscow and Washington have stuck to their opening, conflicting positions — essentially playing to the public (especially West-European) galleries.

But behind the public skirmishing, the real arms control negotiations in Geneva are alive and well.

Indeed, the two teams in the intermediate range nuclear arms control talks (INF) have gotten down to the substance of the bargaining remarkably fast, without procedural or data wrangles. Although the negotiations are barely two months old (discounting the Christmas recess), complete arms control proposals have already been exchanged.

This has been achieved despite the East-West confrontation over Polish repression, and despite the Poland-triggered postponement in setting a date for opening the longer range strategic arms reduction talks (START, née strategic arms limitation talks or SALT).

It also makes clear that the American hawks who wanted to drop all talks with the Russians after Polish martial law was declared have not prevailed in the Reagan administration.

Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. has made blistering indictments of the Polish repression. He has warned that it casts a dark shadow over arms control negotiations. But he has not retreated from his observation of last December that nuclear arms control falls in an urgent, special category of contacts that should not be broken off, at least at the present stage of events in Poland.

This reasoning also extends tacitly to the START talks that were tentatively scheduled to begin in late March or early April. Because of Poland, Mr. Haig refused to set a date for their opening at his Jan. 27 meeting with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko. But indications are that the original timetable might still be kept.

Haig has emphasized that preparations for START are continuing. And reports from Washington say that the

bureaucracy there is intensively vetting three alternatives before making the final choice of the initial American position on strategic limitations.

Meanwhile, Western intelligence figures show a continuing and more rapid buildup in the Soviet Union's mobile, 5,000-km range, SS-20 missiles over the past year than had been projected earlier. According to well-informed sources, US estimates for mid-February show 32 deployment centers as completed, with five more centers apparently planned in the entire SS-20 program. Each center contains nine launchers.

This means that Western intelligence now counts 88 more SS-20 launchers than a year ago, for a deployment rate of one every four days. The previous Western estimate had been one new deployment every five days.

With three warheads per missile the total number of warheads on the 288 deployed SS-20 missiles is now 864. The rule of thumb calculation that two-thirds of these are targeted on Western Europe thus yields a European figure of 576.

Together with the 300 remaining older Soviet SS-4s and SS-5s, this adds up to 876 Soviet missile warheads currently targeted on Western Europe. By comparison the NATO allies currently have only 162 British and French (and no American intermediate range) missile warheads targeted on the Soviet Union.

NATO plans for mid-1980s deployment would add 572 American NATO missile warheads to this number. But this would still keep NATO below Warsaw Pact figures at 734 to 876, even if the Soviet Union retires its SS-4 and SS-5 warheads (as it has not done so far) at the same rate that it deploys new SS-20s.

In this context the current state of play in the ongoing European nuclear arms control talks in Geneva shows these main differences between the American and Soviet sides.

1. Data base
The two sides are fairly close in their counts of Soviet missiles targeted on Western Europe and NATO missiles targeted on the Warsaw Pact. There is an abyss, however, between the two sides in their count of nuclear aircraft.

The Soviet Union claims a rough total equality of a thousand intermediate range nuclear missiles and aircraft on both sides in the European theater. The West, by contrast, claims an 876:162 superiority in Soviet missile warheads over NATO, or a 2,956 to 931 Soviet superiority in the total equivalent aircraft and missile warheads.

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